Partly basing his play on traditional Ethiopian sources, the author develops the theme of the overwhelming power of fear in the old conflict between superstition and reason in a terse and ritualistic style eminently suited to his story: Ukutee, betrothed to Shanka 'the strong son of the tribe', is under a curse interpreted by the oracle of the sacred Oda Oak to mean that her first-born son should be sacrificed to the ancestral spirits. Shanka has not dared to consummate the marriage and is thereby guilty of defiance. His friend Goaa who has come into contact with more enlightened thinking, promises to approach the oracle again in an effort to rescind the judgement and to prove the strength of his new wisdom. He prevaricates through fear, and takes Ukutee for himself, becoming the father of her child.

The conflicts this situation arouses mount in tension throughout the play, culminating in a powerfully dramatic last scene, where Ukutee (herself now freed from superstitious fear by the impending birth of her child), Shanka and Goaa (both guilty of fear), and the tribal elders, confront the oracle of the Oda Oak under a lowering sky which threatens the thunder to come.

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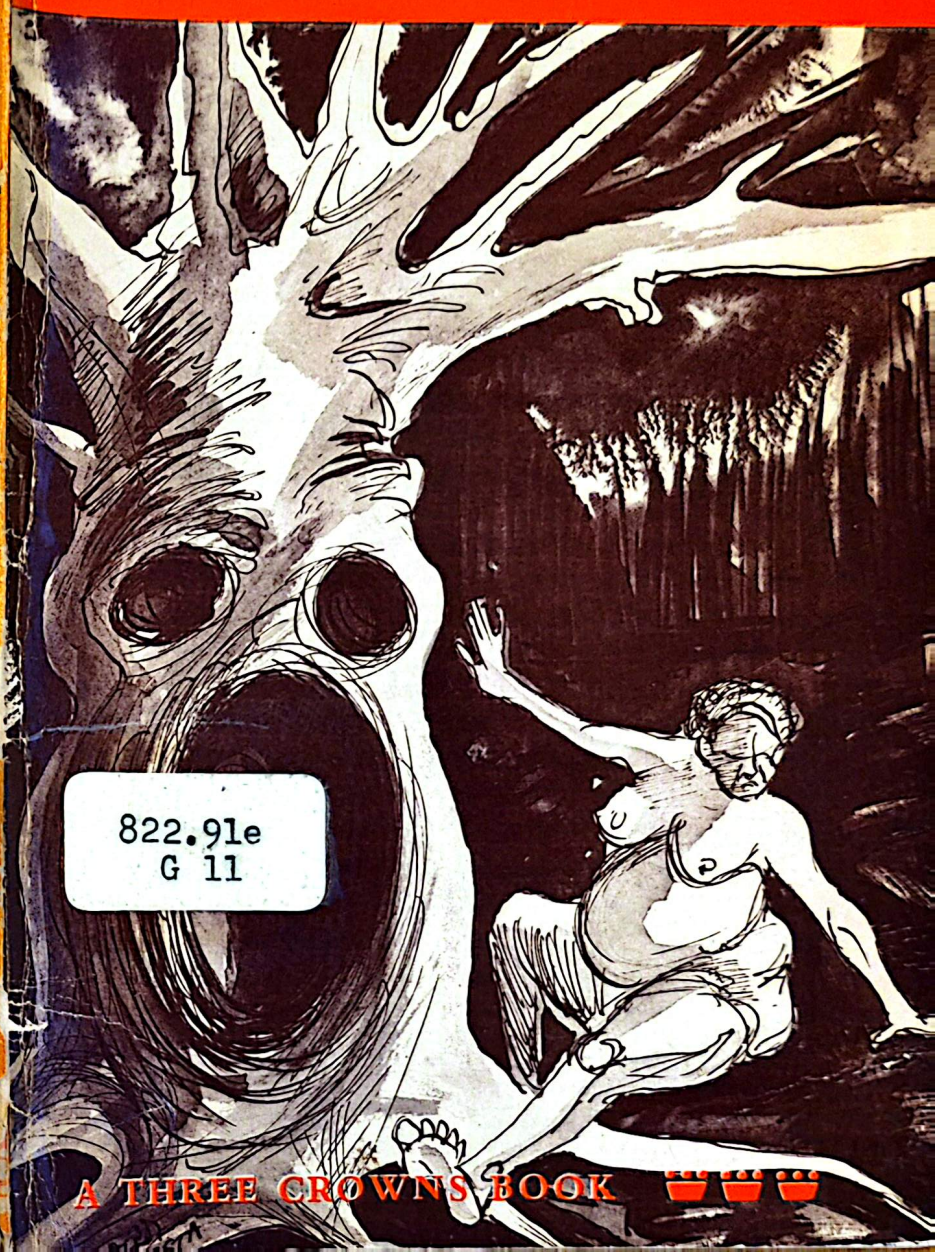
Oda-Oak Oracle

TSEGAYE GABRE-MEDHIN



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A THREE CROWNS BOOK

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ODA OAK ORACLE

Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin, 29, has written over seventeen plays in Amharic, Ethiopia's national language; two of these are adaptations of William Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Macbeth*, the first of which he staged in Addis Ababa during the fourth century anniversary of Shakespeare (1964). A collection of his English poems (a few of which have recently appeared in leading African literary magazines), were published in the February 1965 issue of the *Ethiopia Observer*. *Oda Oak Oracle* is his first published English play, and his two earlier ones, *Tewodros* and *Azmari*, will appear in a special issue of the *Ethiopia Observer* early in 1966. He is at present Acting Director of the Haile Sellassie I Theatre, Addis Ababa, and is working on an adaptation of *Hamlet*, and on a new English play, *Ashes-Black-Antigone*.

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Oda
Oak Oracle

A legend of black peoples,
told of gods and God, of hope and love,
and of fears and sacrifices

TSEGAYE GABRE-MEDHIN

LONDON
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1965

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Oxford University Press, Amen House, London E.C.4

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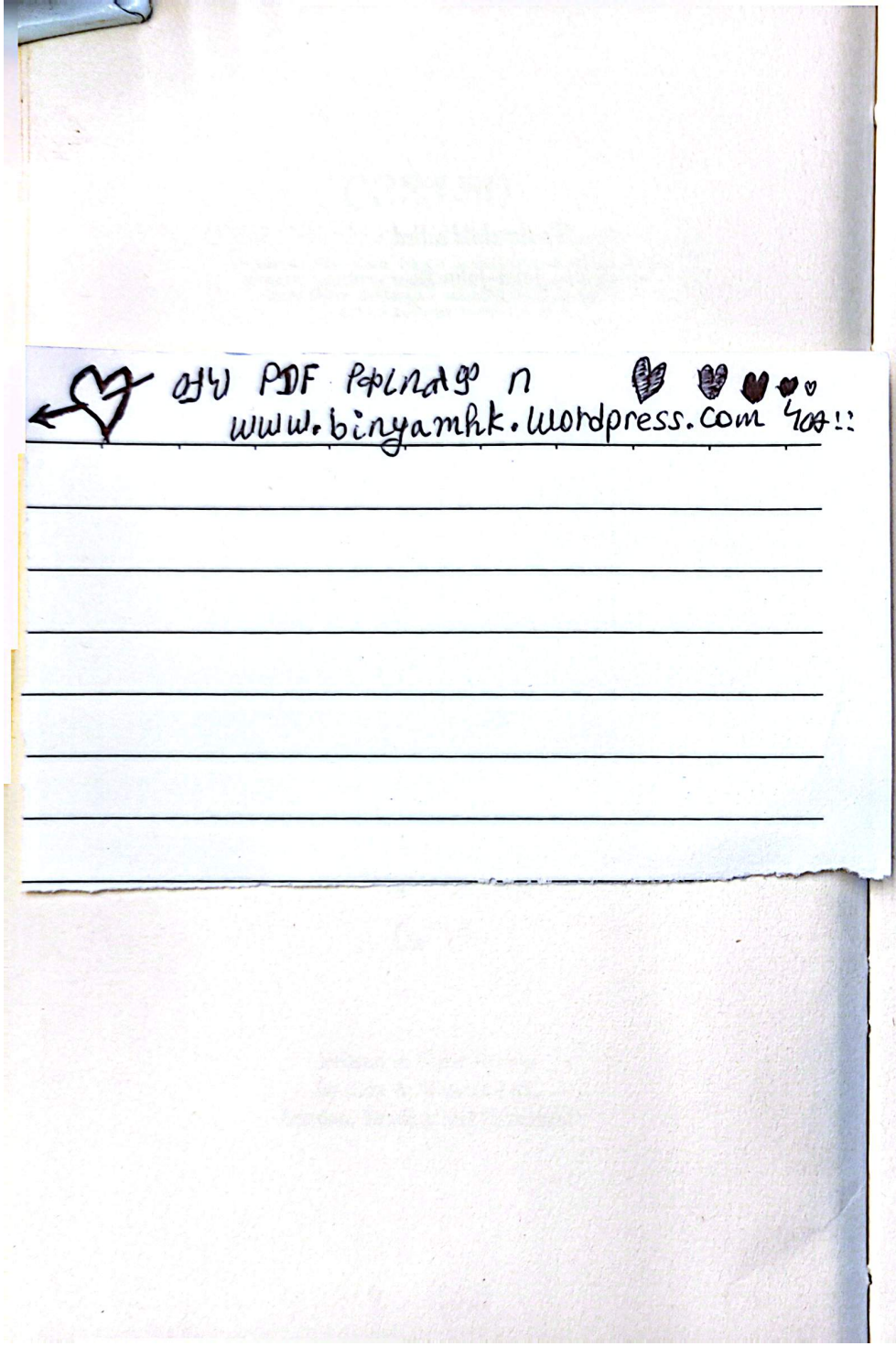
APR 2 1968

To the child called
John-John K.



Dramatis Personae

GOAA *The inhibited by the strangers' ways.*

UKUTEE *The bride, chosen of Oracle.*

ODA-MAN *The all-knowing interpreter of winds.*
(The Oracle of Oda Oak Valley.)

SHANKA *The strong son of the Valley tribe, for whom the bride is chosen.*

FIRST ELDER *Elders of the Valley tribe.*
SECOND ELDER *(Chorus)*
THIRD ELDER

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Now, there was one Goaa (also called the inhibited by the strangers' ways), who was once chained with many others from the Oda Oak Valley tribe and was taken on board the floating huts of the strangers, and floated across the great waters. When the floating huts were wrecked he was the only one to survive and return to the Valley.

There was also Shanka, the strong son of the tribe, who had a bride by the name of Ukutee, chosen for him by the Oracle of Oda Oak. But Shanka refused to know the warmth of his bride, since the Oracle had interpreted that their first-born son should be sacrificed for the satisfaction of the dead ancestors. Shanka's refusal was a defiance of the ancestral Spirits.

Goaa, who knew about this, and who is a friend of Shanka (and secretly an admirer of Ukutee), promised to go personally to the sacred Oda Oak to face the Oracle on their behalf, in order to convince him, with the weight of his strange wisdom, that Shanka and Ukutee should be freed from the interpreted-sacrifice.

It is evening when Shanka sees Goaa approach from the direction of the Oda Oak, the trunk of which is also a cave in which the Oracle, the wise interpreter of the voices of the dead, abides.

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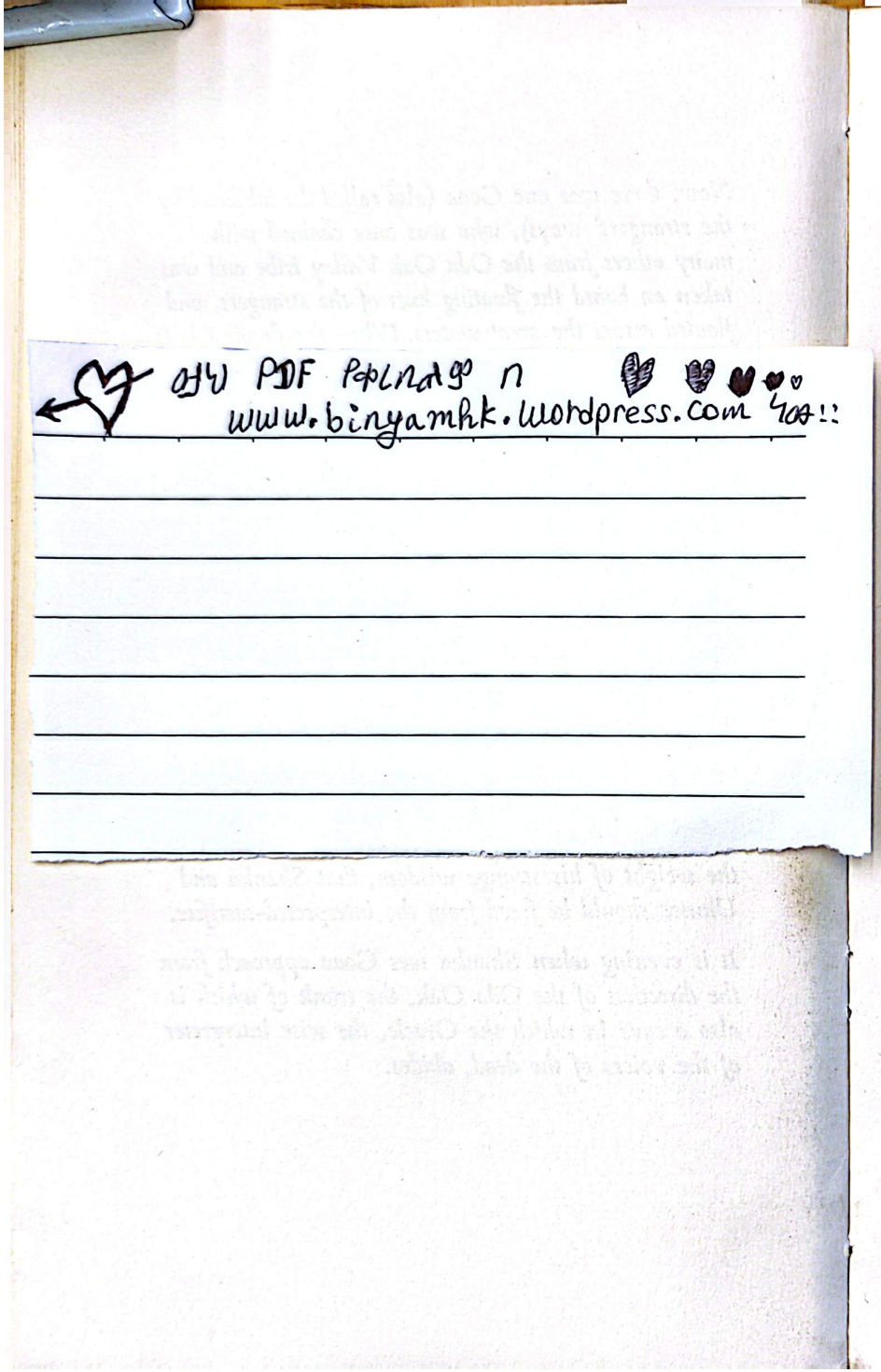

The Prologue

SHANKA Do you come, friend Goaa
With the good news you promised?
The shadow of night
Has been heavy on me
And my troubled heart
Tight and unyielding:
How can I have a peaceful sleep
While the warm breath
Of a tempting bride
That caresses my youthful body
Becomes a living tiger
Turning in my veins?
I saw you approach
From the direction of the Oda Oak
And hoped
You had good news for me, friend.
Have you spoken to the wise Oracle
On my behalf?

GOAA The wise Oracle has no desire
To speak of you, Shanka,
Nor to gaze on me
For I dared to speak
Of the wisdom of the strange ones
For whom he has no ears.
In the sharp stare of the Oracle
I am an object of doubt,
Of suspicion,
In the dead eyes of the wise elders

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I am a peril.

SHANKA Is that to say
You come with bad news, friend?

GOAA I understand your anxiety, Shanka.
But as usual
I feared to see him.
As usual
He would have said
My presence disturbs
The peace of the spirits
Over the holy Oak:
I am unwanted
Since my return
From having been kidnapped.
Since my escape
From the strangers' clasp
Who floated
Our peoples of the Valley
Across the great waters,
I am avoided by the Oracle.
I am accused
Of having come back
With their strange ways.

SHANKA Is that why
You failed me, friend Goaa?
Our elders say
A fallen trunk invites more axes,
And I have attracted
Enough failures
From friend and foe alike:
Even the spirits of our ancestors
Have turned their backs on me.

GOAA I understand your impatience, Shanka.

You are the strong son of the Valley tribe
Yet every night
Your heart sighs with despair
And your strength melts
Into the thin air.
But also remember, Shanka,
The anger of our forefathers
Is only a nightmare
From the world of our dead,
While the bitterness
Of an ignored woman
Is the truer hell
Raging inside your hut.
Take your bride into your arms
Strong man, now:
The desire of a lonely woman
Is in the nature of a wild cat.
A moment ago
I watched your bride, Ukutee,
Descending with the evening sun
Towards the river behind the holy Oak
With her pot of water on her head:
And the manner of her movement, Shanka,
The rhythm of her young body
Was like that of a thirsty leopard,
A great temptation
For the eyes
Of the young village men.
Take her in your arms
And once you have established peace
Within your own hut
You may, perhaps, achieve peace
From without, as well, Shanka.

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SHANKA Perhaps!
But this 'perhaps' sounds insecure.
And I, Goaa, have been shaken enough
With insecurity, and
With the force of an emotion
That urges me to hold
A bride I shall not touch.

GOAA And I, still say:
Take her in your arms,
Strong man.

SHANKA What you say
Is not altogether unwise, Goaa,
Not in the eyes
Of the peoples of the Valley
Not in the concept
Of our elders and our Oracle,
For it has been a custom
Older than the memory of man.
But it is strange
Coming from you,
Goaa of the strangers' wisdom.
When you fear
To rise and speak
Of your new wisdom
At the abode of the Oracle
Who interprets the wishes of our dead,
I too fear. I fear
The weight of sincerity you hold
For this strange wisdom.
Our elders say
The strange bird that sings courage
Must first learn to risk
The sight of the hunter's spear.

Go back to the Oda Oak, friend,
And face the Oracle.
Is it not you who often say
Only a truer wisdom
Saves the afflicted spirit?
Face him,
Goaa of the strangers' ways,
So that I, too,
Shall draw courage
From your new wisdom.

GOAA Face him and what, Shanka?
To face him
With my strange wisdom
Shall be my darkest sin.
Did I run from the strangers
Merely to be felled
By my own people
As one possessed by evil spirits?
Whatever spirit
I happen to be possessed of
I am not ready
To die for
Nor to die of, Shanka.
But you, strong man,
You stand so tall and proud
With the air of one
Accustomed to having his own way.
You are the strong one of our people.

SHANKA Strong, I am,
Yet I'm the weakest.
The dead are my witness
That many a dreary night
I lamented like a woman.

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Strong, I am,
But I have lost the heart
With which to lead
Our young hunters
Into the dark depth of the jungles.
But the ancestors
Have grown deaf
To the cries of my heart.

GOAA But power and sacrifice
Are the only godly preoccupations
Our ancestral spirits
Are concerned with, Shanka.

SHANKA Strong, I am.
The strong one of our people,
Of our rivers, of our great savannas,
Of the dead silence of our Valleys,
Of the fearful depth of our jungles,
Of the furnace of our sun,
Of the mountains of our clouds,
I am the strong one
Yet I'm also the helpless one.
I have no fear
Of the great thundering skies,
I have no fear
Of the giant burning snake
Whose vicious roar
Vibrates
In the chests of our mountains,
No fear
Of the giant burning snake
That cracks open the womb of the skies,
That writhes
With a blazing wrath

And vanishes
Into the womb of the skies,
Many of its kind
I fought and slew in our jungles
Before they could devour me, Goaa.
I taught our young hunters
How to hunt and slay them.
I have no fear of strength,
I am the strong one of the strong:
But now I fear,
I recoil from the warmth of my bride,
If I hold her in my arms,
You know, a child of sacrifice
Shall come forth.
A child long condemned
By our all-knowing Oracle
To be a sacrifice to our dead.
No,
Goaa of the strangers' ways,
I shall not touch her.
If the dead know no mercy
I shall never know my bride.

GOAA Sacrifice, you know,
Is the sole desire of our dead,
The ultimate defilement, Shanka.
It has always been so.
Have courage
And hold your bride to yourself, now.
Do not expose her warmth
For the temptation of others.
Take her to yourself, now.
Worry of what comes
When it comes.

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SHANKA No,
I cannot, Goaa.
If I yield,
Nine moons is not so distant.
Let then
My unquenched desire
Shrink, if it may,
In my bitter gall,
That of my bride
Eat into her veins
Like a worm
In a newly rotting fruit,
And let
The pride of our dead
Shriek with venom.
I cannot, Goaa.
I wish, though,
You had never taught me about the Word.
The Beginning Word
Of the strangers' wisdom.
The Beginning Word Who you said
Becomes all:
Becomes even I.
I cannot, friend.
Nine moons is not so distant.

GOAA Worry of what comes
When it comes!
Leaving a bride
Like a flame burning in a grave
For none to profit of
But for all to watch and covet
Is unlike the role
Of the strong son of the tribe.

SHANKA Nine moons is not so distant!
I am thirsty
The spirits are my witness,
Thirsty
From a glowing ember
Between my thighs:
I am thirsty
With a fire
That rises from my innermost,
But I dampen it.
My tears have drowned
My flavour for life,
My sighs have dried
The tears of my heart.
My desire says, 'yes',
But my pride,
The spite of my soul, draws back.
To draw
Our burning thighs together
Is to rouse
The ghost of plagues
That will attack
The foetus in her womb.
O cold cruelty –
With my untouchable bride
So near, so close
And yet so far.
Cold cruelty of our Oracle –
To let me be devoured
In the boiling marsh of desire:
Cold cruelty of our elders –
To watch me
With faces of stone

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And dead hearts,
Hearts of cradles of shame.
How vain
My struggle has been, Goaa!
There comes my bride
With a pot of water on her head
And fire in her bosom,
I must go.
Yet how I wish
I could kill desire in me,
Burn it
With the fire it kindles in me,
Rather than watch my life smothered
On the eve of its blossom. . . .
Still, friend,
I refuse to yield.
If I yield,
Nine moons is not so distant.
I must go.

[*Exit Shanka on seeing Ukutee enter.*]

UKUTEE There goes my hero.
In the open day
He avoids my presence,
In the dark of night
He avoids my warmth.
My hero is tied to the fear
Of what will happen
In nine moons,
I am tied to the fear
Of the kind of shame
Loneliness may goad me into.
Did you manage,

Goaa of the strangers' wisdom,
To gain for us
The pity of the Oda Oak Oracle?

GOAA No, Ukutee,
Chosen bride of Shanka,
I still lack the courage
To face the Oracle.

UKUTEE I feared so, Goaa.
It is hard
To blame you for it.
It is also hard for me
To go on this way
At my age.
I'd rather live possessed
In human passion
For a short nine moons,
Than merely exist
For an idle ninety summers.

GOAA Your hero
Is a stubborn one, woman.
There is no one
Who does not surrender
To the demand of love.
Even the fields, the hills,
And the jungles, bend
Before the rights of love.
But your hero
Is deaf to honest advice.

UKUTEE The village women
In their foolish whisper
Accuse me of infertility, Goaa.
They know little
Of my hunger.

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I am hungry.
I have not known satisfaction.
I have forgotten
How to hope for it.
I have forgotten how to laugh
For a single morning,
A single day,
A single night.
Perhaps you think me
An idle woman, Goaa?

GOAA No,
I do not think you foolish,
Bride of the strong son of our tribe,
For I have known loneliness.
I have valued
The sight of the shadow
Of the white clouds
Embracing the naked fields.
I have valued
The sight of a hidden flower
Under the thick shade of a bush
Waiting
For the song of the buzzing bee.
I have valued
The sight of the evening sun
Dipping its arrow of rays
Into the shimmering horizon.
I have known loneliness, Ukutee.
But I also know
That Shanka is wedded
To his foolish will.

UKUTEE It is hard.
It is very hard

To go on my way.
Neither of us
Sleeps peacefully,
Like guilty cowards
Who expect lightning
At every breath.
We creep away
From one another
Into the cold wings of darkness.
It is hard
In one's restless dream
To wait
For a strong arm
Which is not there.

GOAA I understand, woman.
When your young days
Become your prison,
Your heart
Is only a scorching desert,
For the fire that passion lights,
Having no outlet,
Turns into a flame
That rages within one's flesh.

UKUTEE Yes, Goaa.
But is it really
The wishes of our dead
That I wither slowly
Without one touch of kindness?
Is it, Goaa?
Is it the will
Of the spirits of our ancestors
That I should be wasted
Without one warm look

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To make me feel I am alive?
To make me feel
I am a needed woman?
Is it,
Goaa of the strangers' wisdom?

GOAA It is not easy, Ukutee,
To speak
Of the gloomy path
Of a lone walker.
Loneliness is
When the ripe fruit fails,
To make the bird
Aware of its existence.
Loneliness is
When the avoided heart,
Growing stale every night,
Wears a mask of bitterness,
While the tense veins
Growing frantic and mad
Scratch at the mask
Of a stricken heart.
Loneliness is
When the aged mule
Rubs its flank
Against the deserted trunk
Of a dead bush.
Loneliness is
When the moon is left cold
Among a glowing
Jungle of stars.

UKUTEE All is blank for me.
Blank days
Of words and noises,

Blank nights
Of ghosts and shadows.
The whisper of passion
Is fire, true,
But the one unheard,
The one expected in vain,
Is even more maddening, Goaa.
All is blank for me, Goaa.

GOAA Enough said, woman,
Take your pot of water
And away.
Take this warm body away.
Take this figure
Of life and temptation
Away. Take
These soft eyes
Away, Ukutee.

UKUTEE Why, Goaa,
Should you stamp out
The echo of my heart
Into cold silence!

GOAA You do not understand,
Woman of folly.
Consider
The voice that abides
Within that lofty Oak.
The voice that echoes
The anger of our dead,
The rage of the skies
Upon which their spirits float.

UKUTEE Shame.
One fears what will happen
In nine moons,

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Another
The face of our Oracle.
And what man would consider
The appeal of my heart!
This one seems to fear
Even my presence.

GOAA I have no fear of you,
Woman of folly.
I had no fear, even
When the blue walls above us
That hold back
That mighty waters
Threatened to break open
On the floating huts.
I had no fear
When the winds rose
To cut our faces
Like a thousand blades,
And the floating huts
Danced dangerously
While many, many great rivers
Seemed to ride towards us
One above the other.
And now
I have no fear of you, woman.

UKUTEE Would you dare, then,
To steal me, even
Against the will of our dead,
Goaa of the strangers' wisdom?
Against the will
Of our elders and of our Oracle?
Would you, Goaa?

GOAA O the wrath

That must follow!
But I would, woman,
I would.

UKUTEE And not grieve over
Your deeds
After nine moons, Goaa?

GOAA No,
I shall try not to grieve over
My deeds, Ukutee,
For is it not
The poisonous root
That kills,
Which also saves life?
And is it not
The poisonous fly
That makes honey, woman?

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The Climax

I

It is now nine moons after. Ukutee is under labour, and at early dawn Goaa has shouldered her from the village to the sacred Oda Oak, in order to repent of their sin to the Oda-man.

GOAA Rise, woman.
Rise.
No good crouching over your belly, now.
Look. Daybreak is blackened out
Behind these hideous clouds. . . .
A sign of wrath.
Rise.

UKUTEE But call
The wise interpreter
Of the heavy winds
From the great mountain of our dead,
Call the wise interpreter
Of the mighty thunders
From the skies of their rest.
It is now nine moons, since,
And my hour has come. Call.
And the nibbling creature inside me
Is struggling to break through.
Call him.

GOAA Yes, Ukutee – but I shudder.
I fear what should emerge
From this worm-eaten

Body of a trunk
Torn out into a living cave
By lightning.
We have sinned against the spirits,
I fear.
Against our dead ancestors, woman.
The suckling of your womb
Should have not been of my flesh.
I shudder, woman.
We have wronged the spirits.
They shall have vengeance,
I fear.

UKUTEE Talk not of vengeance, Goaa,
At my hour of labour. No.
And not within the shade of Oda-Oak.
No;
Pick of its leaves
And place them on your temple
Now. And take back your foul utterance.
Why, Goaa,
You shouldered me
All the rough way from the village
To kneel in the Oda shade
And repent
To the wise interpreter.
Come, Goaa. Call on him.
Kneel by the door of the trunk
And, with your spread palms,
Knock at the sacred barrier, and
The old wise shall understand.

GOAA He will understand
Only our sin, Ukutee.

UKUTEE It is only the warmth we shared

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That has been termed our sin.
What! Are you men
Never prepared
To pay for the happiness
You take out of life?
We, mothers, do.
First, in such shame-faced agony
As I am in now. The rest
In an insecurity
That outlives our loves.
Is not happiness more real
When one is prepared
To pay for it?

GOAA Ours was a happiness unblessed
By the living shadows of our dead.

UKUTEE Yet it was real, Goaa.

GOAA You dare insist
On provoking the spirits?
You goaded me, Ukutee,
Into the sin you call real.
Yes. What are the drone's chances
Of resisting
The desirous hum
Of the queen bee?
Do you doubt the presence
Of their hovering shadows,
Witnessing your temptation?
Do you? Dare you, even
Within the reach of the Oda Oak,
Unless you are possessed
Of the evil ghosts? Dare you?
Rise, now,
And let us run to a corner

Where the skies are not as ugly.
With your accusations, woman,
You disarm me
Of the strength to face
The searching eyes
Of the Old Wise.
Rise.

UKUTEE Shame, man,
Silence.
Has the wisdom of the strange ones
Who took you across the great waters
Spilled the gall of your manhood?
Is shame
The wisdom they taught you?

GOAA Yes. They are dehumanized
To teach but
The wisdom of fear.
And how to feel ashamed of oneself,
How to grow wild
Under the cold wings of hatred.
Rise, Ukutee.

UKUTEE Shame, man,
I see too much of hate
In your eyes.
Shame! . . . In the open day
The heart
Of the lonesome dove
Vibrates
With the grace of the eagle,
Yet the claws of the ugly owl
Is what tears its eyes out
In the dead of night.
Shame, man. [*Pause.*]

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[*She groans with the pain of labour.*]
Peace.
Do not scratch at my womb,
Creature of iniquity,
For the dead are merciful
Even if I was in the wrong,
And they judge I am not.
Shame.

GOAA Why then, Ukutee,
Does the crooked arm
Of the dark cloud
Spread its fangs, low
Over the sacred Oak,
As if to reach for your soul?
Why?
You have sinned.
They shall have vengeance.
The guilty is only the temptress
Who calls sin happiness.
Then awake, Old Wise!
Interpreter of heavy winds,
Open the trunk,
Your holy abode,
And smell out the guilty!
Awake,
Reader of the parchment in man's mind,
Living image of our judging fore fathers,
Awake.
Wise speaker of the language of the spirits,
Inscriber of their truth
In the memory of man, awake.

UKUTEE Quiet, unfledged of my womb,
Quiet.

It's your abode of fertility
You're kicking,
Quiet.

GOAA Awake, then,
Interpreter of heavy winds
And smell out the guilty.
Awake!

ODA-MAN Who calls to the Oda Oak, and
At such a young hour
To shake the hovering wings
Of our bye-gone?
[*Moves out of the trunk.*]
It is early dawn
But the birds have been frightened
Into a strange quietness,
And the sun,
Fresh but already tired,
Has turned on our Valley
Her cold shoulders.
[*Approaches Goaa.*]
Why, it is Goaa,
Victim of the ways of the strange ones.
And Ukutee, daughter of Komba,
And chosen bride of Shanka,
Of the strong son of our tribe.
What brings you, children,
Into the shelter of the sacred Oak?
Is there some trouble
In the village?
Or a message
From the elders of the Valley?

UKUTEE Hold your peace,
Creature of my womb.

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Hold.

ODA-MAN [*After a pause.*]
I note with fear
That silence reigns
Over the birds of dawn,
Yes. Sulking in their nests
On the branches of Oda Oak,
They refuse to hail
The cloud hidden orb of day,
Yes. From behind the dark blanket
The young twilight
Grins with a cold sneer.
A blurred, dull, crimson gaze,
The eye of a poisoned hyena,
Sick, yet meaningless.

UKUTEE Quiet, don't bite me,
Fruit of my desire,
Quiet.

* * *

ODA-MAN Bye-gone fathers!
Who see
The flutter of the hearts of rocks,
Who feel
The secret corners
Where good and evil materialize,
Breathe your bitterness!
Sigh
From the giant mountain of your rest,
Speak your will
In your language of winds,
And your peoples of the Valley
Shall learn your truth!
Speak!

* * *

GOAA Must they speak
Only thunder!
Must they rain
Only lightning, that
Cracks across the dark skies?
They reply
Only in wrath!

UKUTEE Quiet,
Unfledged of my womb!
[*She groans with pain.*]

ODA-MAN You're shivering, children!
And the message of anger
Echoes back
To the peoples of the Valley.
For the frost of curse
Let loose at the evil
Strikes the innocent as well.
Look,
The blizzard of your shame
Attempts to uproot
Even the Oda Oak.
Children, why
Have you angered our dead?

GOAA I was tempted,
Old Wise!

UKUTEE [*She groans.*]
Peace!
I am but in the agony
Of labour,
In the grinding teeth
Of one about to become life.
Speaker

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Of the will of our ancestors,
I sinned, when
My man refused
To know of my warmth.
Peace. By having to appear alive
In my season of hot youth,
I happened to affect another,
Also in the prison of warm flesh.

ODA-MAN But true, Goaa,
Because of your inhibition
Of the strange ones,
You defied the wisdom
Of our bye-gone fathers,
And aroused their curse
Upon all; yes.

GOAA No, Wise One,
I was only tempted!

ODA-MAN And although
Chained by the strange ones,
Thrown
Into their big floating huts,
Driven
Across the great waters
That divide our lands,
You fell victim
To their strange wisdom,
Possessed
By the strange Spirit they name
The Beginning Word.

GOAA I. . . . I was,
Old Interpreter.

ODA-MAN But when the evil ghosts
On the great waves were provoked,

And the waters rose
Higher than those mountains,
And the medicine-man
Of the strange ones
Called upon his Beginning Word,
You were possessed, Goaa!

GOAA So I was,
Old Wise.
And the mountain of waters
Stood above our heads
Like these ugly skies,
Wise One,
The floating huts were sinking,
With many,
Many peoples of our valley,
Wise One.
Many peoples, yes.
More than the number of leaves
On Oda Oak.
Even the spirits of our fathers
Bent before the storms.
They failed us,
Old Interpreter!
The many, many, ceased moaning.
The many, many ceased wailing.
And the medicine-man
Of the strange ones ceased calling.

ODA-MAN Calling, Goaa?

GOAA The strange Spirit he names
The Beginning Word,
Old Wise.
That at the Beginning
There was a Word.

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That the Word becomes
Many, many a man.
Many, many a people.
That It also becomes us,
The chained peoples
In the floating huts.

ODA-MAN And you took this strange Word
Unto your heart?

GOAA I did, then,
Old Interpreter.

ODA-MAN Yet you remained
Possessed, Goaa!
Our dead whispered on the waves
For you to ride
On the broken pillar
Of the floating hut, back
To the land of the valley.
Yet you forsook them!
So the worm
Born of the sweat of the earth,
Learns to spit its dirt back
On the mother earth, itself,
Goaa. You abused
The wisdom of our dead.
You let your head
Turn into a dark cavern,
Where the ghosts of strangers
Lingered. What foul days
To the memory of the ancestors!
Like a coward son, Goaa,
You stole the innocence
Of the bride of their choice.
In place of the pure soul

Of the strong son of our Valley,
Your inhibited soul
Instilled in her fertility,
Has aroused
The anger of our bye-gone.
Alas,
Victim of the strangers' ways,
Your flesh of lust
Has brought us shame!

UKUTEE Quiet.
You are breaking
Your nest of maternity.
Quiet.
[*She groans.*]

ODA-MAN Alas, Goaa!
Dead, you shall be ousted
From the company of our dead.
So their voices sigh!
Alive, rude tongues of women
Shall poke at you.
So the winds speak!
So the judging-dead breathe!
You shall be mocked
By the young of the Valley.
You shall be shunned
By the elders.
So their voices moan!
Dead, your spirit shall wander.
In your hut,
Among your cattle,
Evil ghosts shall reside.
So their voices moan!
Dead, your spirit shall wander.

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It shall be homeless,
Restless. Without peace.
So the winds speak!
So our dead moan!
And you, Ukutee,
Chosen daughter of the tribe. . . .

UKUTEE Quiet, I beg you,
Child of my womb,
Quiet.

ODA-MAN And you, woman,
Comforter
Of every man's sweat,
The creature in you
Shall not come forth.
Ever.
So the winds thunder!
So the angered voices of our dead
Sigh!
The undelivered of your womb,
Shall not come forth
To declare life.
Ever.
It is pronounced unworthy of life.
It is pronounced unholy
For the sacrifice
Of their living shadows.
Ever!
So the angered voices sigh!

II

ODA-MAN It is almost noon,
Yet light is still unborn.
And here comes Shanka,
Her chosen man.
Also the elders of the Valley.

[*Enter Elders with Shanka.*]

It is good to see you all
Alive and in health, wise elders.
Let the good spirits be thanked
For having protected all of us
Through many nights and many summers.
What brings you
Into the shelter of the Oda Oak,
Wise friends?

FIRST ELDER We come, Old Interpreter,
That you entreat the dead
To let forth the sun.

SECOND ELDER To let loose the bright shower
From the tight grip
Of the darkness of clouds.
To let peace rain.

UKUTEE Peace! . . . [*A drawn-out cry.*]

ODA-MAN What do you say, Shanka?

SHANKA Our cattle low
For the sight of the sun.
Our young cry
For the noon,
And our eyes
For light.

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The seeds in our soil
Shall not sprout
Without the warmth of the sun.

UKUTEE But Shanka, my man,
You turned your back
On my warmth.
On me, your woman.
[*Groans with pain.*]
On me, your bride,
Elect-of-oracle.
I offered my fire of youth,
My innocence
My flower of life.
Man of the Valley's men,
Strong of our people,
You won't even have of me,
What our dead
Demanded you should take.

SHANKA With my back turned on you
Woman of my choice,
The fire of youth
Dies in me.
A moment of warmth
Shared between us,
Would also have meant
Dealing destruction
To a babe unborn.

ODA-MAN Thus you stood aloof,
Shanka: In order that
The oracle of our bye-gone
Should not be fulfilled.

FIRST ELDER And is it so
That Shanka kindled

The heart-burning of the spirits?

THIRD ELDER Is that why
The gnashing of their teeth
Thunders over our heads?

SHANKA Why, Wise Elders,
Must the dead feast
On the sapping of life
Of a babe,
Who should have been materialized
As part of my blood?

SECOND ELDER The dead only demand
In their ancient wisdom,
Older than the memory of man.
The living only obey
Wondering;
Till they join hands with them
In the marriage of death.

FIRST ELDER Who questions their wisdom
But one possessed
By the lurking evil ghosts?
Who doubts their judgement
But the unknowing strangeness of youth?

ODA-MAN Witness then, Shanka,
The anger
Of the spirits of all ages!

FIRST ELDER The biting cold
Skinning the green
Off the surface of our valley.

UKUTEE Witness
The bitter calls of our dead, and
A creature locked up in me, alive.
A womb torn apart, yet
Never to deliver.

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Eternal captive of myself
Within myself:
Cast in the teeth
Of unceasing labour.

THIRD ELDER The cloud of darkness
Shutting out
The blade of light
From the breast of the Oda Oak.
Witness.

SHANKA O sad days.
Blank heart of my youth
Whose hope slumbers
In the mist of yesterday.
Awake.
My eyes are caved in
Before their time,
My passion
Put back in the ravages of time.
Were I to know
The warmth of my bride,
Old sages of our valley,
Whose tongues are wisdom,
Consider: the child
That would have been born of my love
Would also have been for doom.
Consider: it would have been
An innocent born condemned.
Laboured
For the sacrifice of our dead.
A child created of me,
Old Sages of our valley,
Would have been a death
Of a piece of me.

How strong is the strong
With his essence cut up?
Say. How manly
With his heart borne down?
O sad days.
Joy of youth that
Can no longer be:
Humanity that is outraged in me, though
Eaten by the rust of decadence,
Awake.

GOAA Awake, and what, Shanka?
The bitter seed you sowed
I reaped. My child
Is the one condemned unborn.
Mine is pronounced even unworthy
For the sacrifice
You will not offer.
I am the one exiled
Alive or dead,
Because of the woman
You will not even touch.
Is it then Shanka
Who should cry to the ancestors
For reaping where he has not sown?
Who should raise his voice
Against the sacrifice of our ancient oracle?
Although it is I who is condemned,
It is you, Shanka,
Who first bid defiance to our dead.

SECOND ELDER And mark
The soil of our valley
Cursed to infertility,
Because of Shanka's souring of

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The temper of the spirits.
Mark the weakening lowing
Of the half-starved cattle,
The chill-poisoned green of the valley
Rendered mute.
The lust of man's enemies
Aroused from the dark woods,
Breathless to spring upon us.

GOAA I dare your strength, Shanka!

ODA-MAN Yet beware the fate
That awaits our valley
In this outraged womb of time!

SHANKA Alas,
Injustice unjustifiable!
What do you desire of me,
Spirits of our fathers?
What do you want
Of your strong son
Whose sweet bird of youth
Has been caged and
Stifled in the ills of his heart?
Alas, bride of my choice
Whose warmth I knew not,
Unborn child
Who could have been mine,
Giant valley of my fathers
Whose son of pride I was,
I stand charged
By the gods of our Oda Oak.
What do you want of me
Wise Interpreter?
What do you want
From the embodiment

Of your peoples' heroism?
From your hero
With a torn heart
On a wooden horse?
What do you want of me
Wise Elders?

THIRD ELDER Banishment
To the lands of the strange ones.

UKUTEE Peace! . . .
[*A drawn out groaning.*]

SECOND ELDER I say, 'Death'.
Death
For the satisfaction of the spirits
He defied.

FIRST ELDER Would Shanka's death
Appease the anger of the spirits,
Wise Interpreter of their language?

ODA-MAN Before death or banishment,
The defiant, I interpret,
According to the oracle of age,
Shall be matched, in
A combat to the death, against
The coward who stole
The bride of their choice.
I interpret that
After the battle
The 'undead' of the two defiant ones
Shall be flogged out of the Valley
By the woman under labour,
Into the dark woods
And into the lands of the strange ones.
That, I interpret
In the voices of the heavy winds,

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Shall appease their anger:
I interpret
A combat to death, against
The coward who stole
The bride of their choice!

GOAA I have already
More than once dared
Your pride, Shanka.
If fate decrees that
We shall fight,
I dare you again.
I am prepared.

SHANKA I am not.
Not against you
At any rate.

GOAA And why not, Shanka?

UKUTEE Peace! . . .
[*A drawn-out cry.*]

SHANKA You're more than a brother to me,
Goaa. You imparted your knowledge
Of the wisdom of the strangers
To me. You did. You let me share the secret
Of your happy obsession by the Word
Which you said, is all loving.

GOAA Silence, Shanka,
I said nothing of the kind.

THIRD ELDER Mark,
The intrigue they lodged
Against our dead
Is coming to light!

GOAA I said nothing of the kind!

SHANKA So you forsake
All that you stood for

In your infirmity of purpose?

GOAA Not that I am poor-spirited,
Shanka, apart from the infirmity
Of the wisdom of the strangers
That whispers in my ears.
Infirmity!
They blow
The name of their strange Word
Whichever way the wind carries It,
For they bear It
On the tip of their tongues,
And not in their hearts
Which are filled with fears. Infirmity.

SHANKA The good in you
Is scratched out by hate.
You smell it!
I am not prepared.

GOAA I am! . . . Infirmity!
They market Its name
To our kind, for gold; and
For shame,
While their frightened hearts
Regard us
As their open-day nightmares.
Infirmity!
How can I not forsake the Word
When they trade in It, Shanka?

FIRST ELDER The price for shame
Is even a worse shame.
You betrayed the tribe Shanka.
Start your combat
To the death!

SHANKA I am still not ready, Goaa.

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GOAA I am more than ready. [*Strikes.*]
UKUTEE Peace! . . .
[*A drawn-out cry of anguish.*]
SECOND ELDER Goaa attacks like a tiger!
SHANKA Do you strike, Goaa,
Even though I am unprepared!
GOAA I shall not have
The rude tongues of our women
Poke at me!
[*He attacks.*]
Or dead
I shall not have
My spirit wander!
[*Attacks.*]
FIRST ELDER Fight.
Your blood shall heal
The sickness of the soil
Which yields only pestilence.
UKUTEE Peace! . . .
[*A long drawn-out cry.*]
THIRD ELDER It is like a battle
Between beasts!
They gasp
Like reptiles at midday!
FIRST ELDER Their deaths will prevent
The wall of our tribe
From breaking down.
SECOND ELDER The one has mastered
The art of dodging,
But the shaft of his spear
Seems feeble for his weight.
Look at them!
UKUTEE Peace! . . .

FIRST ELDER The gentle quiet
That has been crushed
From the land of the valley
Will soon settle among us.
THIRD ELDER Shanka fences.
He attacks. He attacks!
Goaa falls. Goaa falls!
He is dying.
UKUTEE No! . . . Peace! . . .
GOAA Shanka, don't shoulder my dead body
To the city of dark woods
Where white ants are waiting.
Also, Shanka,
Never run,
To the land of the strangers.
THIRD ELDER He is dead!
UKUTEE No! . . .
[*A long drawn-out cry of anguish.*]
FIRST ELDER The peace of the spirits
That have escaped
Our mountains shall now
Take over.
ODA-MAN Go, Wise Elders,
Instruct the peoples of the valley
That the curse
Which held off the sunshine
Has been smelled out. Go
Instruct them
To gather behind the mountain,
And witness Shanka banished,
Possessed with the evil
That inflicted our land.
Go.

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[*Exit Elders.*]

Shoulder your dead, Shanka,
And be gone
From the valley of our tribe.
Sneak
Into the land of the strange ones.
Rise,
Ukutee. Take this scourge
And flog your man out
With his dead.
And the oracle of age
Shall have been satisfied.
Rise.

UKUTEE No! . . .
Peace! . . .
[*When the Oda-man gives her the scourge she faints.*]

The Finale

UKUTEE Wise one:
But I dare not
Lift my arm against
My man: you know. Against
The master of my bread.
It is not the custom,
You know.
The mockery of the wives
Shall tear my eyes out.

ODA-MAN Should I not say better
What the custom is
And is not? Woman,
The defiant has shouldered
His dead.
Flog him out. Yes,
Flog him out.
This dead body is the abode
Of a strange evil ghost
Unknown to our peoples and our valley,
Unknown to the spirits of our ancestors,
And must be carried away
Across the great waters, now.
Flog him, woman.
For only then shall you be
Granted the mercy of our dead.
Granted relief
From the pain of labour:
Flog him out. For otherwise,

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The thing of your womb,
Unworthy of sacrifice,
Unworthy of life,
Shall be delivered, silenced.

UKUTEE Gone, then,
This flower of my desire –
Did I bear it only to lose?
Gone, pain of my aching womb,
Pain of my bursting breast.
Shall I not hear
Your first bitter-sweet cry?

ODA-MAN Not while the mountains cry
For water: No, my daughter.
The river beds sucked dry
Moan out at the greedy skies.
No.
The weary cattle on the bare earth
Run amok with thirst,
And the belly of the earth, cracked.
No.
Not while the cry of curse
Echoes in the naked fields, no.

SHANKA Flog away,
My bride of choice,
Flog away, then,
And have done with me,
My unfulfilled love.
The spirits await,
The peoples await,
Flog away, Ukutee.

ODA-MAN With Shanka banished
And Goaa dead, woman,
The curse should be lifted.

Yes. You shall deliver
A new son, woman,
Strong and fierce
Like a young leopard, yes.
He shall grow
To become man of the tribe,
Woman. Scourge this one off
And peace shall reign.
Yes. The spirits
Give you strength, woman.
And let
The life-giving green
Of the Oda Oak valley
With its roots deep
In the ashes of our dead,
Once more rise
With mercy, woman!

SHANKA I stand prepared, Ukutee,
To be banished
In order that a child
May live. Ukutee,
One of the elders is approaching,
The crowd
Must have grown uneasy,
And the thunders are raging.
Strike, Ukutee,
I stand burdened,
Though prepared.

[*Enter Second Elder running.*]

SECOND ELDER The crowd is eager,
Speaker of the language of winds.
Have you no ears

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For the anger of the peoples, Shanka?
Their patience waits
For the whistle of the whip, woman.
Beat him to the bone.
Their voices rise with expectation
And the tribal wall
Trembles to break down.

SHANKA I stand burdened
Yet prepared.

UKUTEE Away, then, my plagued hopes
Away,
My useless dreams
Riddled through and through. Away.
Strength,
Spirits of our ancestors,
Strength.
[*Long-drawn-out cry of pain.*]
Strength!
I'd strike my man
Into the great waters,
Into the land of the strange ones,
Where also, they say,
Inhumanity is at large.
I'd strike him out
With his shouldered burden
For the satisfaction of the oracle.
Away then, my useless dreams,
Riddled through and through,
My plagued hopes, away,
Caught in a ritual dilemma.
I asked for strength,
Spirits of our fathers,
Strength to strike my man!

SHANKA Strength, mother, yes,
For there come other elders
Enraged.
And others and others still,
Driven
By the impatience of the mob.
Strength, mother.

UKUTEE [*Groans painfully.*]
But no,
The throb of my heart
Fails me.
The peace of humanity
Escapes me. No,
I cannot strike my man.
Peace! . . .
And the life in me
Is breaking through
With more flame than ever!
[*A Long-drawn-out groaning.*]

SECOND ELDER She is falling down!

SHANKA She is in agony.
Help!

ODA-MAN Strength!

SECOND ELDER She groans
Like a cow under slaughter!

ODA-MAN Strength!

SHANKA Help! . . .
She is dead!
[*Long silence.*]
[*The child cries a long-drawn-out cry.*]

ODA-MAN She is dead,
But a baby is born
Alive.

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[*The child cries.*]

SECOND ELDER And my fellow Elders
Arrive, emitting fire!

[*Enter First and Third Elders.*]

THIRD ELDER The tribe rises,
Wise Interpreter,
Breathless for revenge!

ODA-MAN She is dead, yes,
But a child is delivered
Alive.

FIRST ELDER And now
We need a sacrifice
To cool the fire
Of the raging mob.
We need!

SHANKA The mother is dead
In giving life,
Wise Elders!

THIRD ELDER Alas,
She is the only one
Elected to whip him out.
Alas!

SECOND ELDER And the child
Is incapable of acting
In her place.
Shame!

THIRD ELDER In which case, then,
The child itself
Must be sacrificed.
It must be!

ODA-MAN She is a daughter of peace,
Born alive.

FIRST ELDER A daughter?
Shame
It is profane even for sacrifice:
Shame! . . .
[*The child cries.*]

SHANKA She is a daughter of peace,
Elders. Sent to us
By the will of our dead,
Elders.

SECOND ELDER And what
Of the breaking tribe?
What of the frenzied mob?

SHANKA Venerables of our valley,
What of the mother, dead
To give it life?

ODA-MAN Shame!

SHANKA Isn't this sign enough
That the dead refuse
To feed on the babe,
Elders?
Who rages for sacrifice?
Our dead?
Or our living?

ODA-MAN Breathe then
Your ancient widsom,
Breathe,
Voices of our forefathers,
Breathe! Breathe
Your age-old truth.
[*The child cries.*]

SHANKA Cry
Child of innocence.
Cry out

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Your bitter-sweet song. Cry.
Cry also that you too
Have become the Word.
Cry, child of innocence.

SECOND ELDER Look!
The mad mob approaches
From behind the mountain!
They flock
Like a moving jungle.

ODA-MAN Speak then,
Ancestors of our valley.
Raise your heavy winds
And proclaim! Unbosom
Your time-honoured wisdom.
Why send a daughter of peace?
Speak!
[*The child cries.*]

SHANKA Cry, peace,
Child of innocence.
Cry, peace,
Babe who took life
To become life.
Cry that they all
Become the Word.
[*The child cries a long-drawn-out cry.*]

SECOND ELDER And, look!
The mob stops dead.
The tribe hesitates.
Look!
And the rage of the dark sky
Is as silent as the grave!
They murmur and hesitate.
Yes. And the birds! Look!

ODA-MAN For the sun is beginning to kiss
With light
The mountains of our fathers. Yes.
For the brightness of the day
Shines upon their faces. Yes.
[*The child cries.*]

SHANKA But yes
For the cry of the new born!
Yes, for the daughter of peace.
Yes, for the father and mother
Who died to give it life.
Yes, for the Word
Who becomes All!
For the cry of innocence
That cuts through the ugly skies, yes.
Yes! . . .

ODA-MAN Alas,
I interpret only wrath!
He spoke in defiance
Of our way of life
Designed for us by the spirits.
Alas!
What sad days are these
Exploding in the faces of our ancestors,
For them to witness
Such gluttonous disloyalty:
And at their expense
The raw upstart of yesterday
Entertains his appetite
Of a lustful defiance.
Alas,
What sad days!
Shame upon his head,

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He who defies
The wisdom of our dead.
Have our elders resigned
Their age-old role of ritual fulfilment!
Would you, gods of Oda Oak,
Let him abuse
The last honour you reserve?
Would you,
Ancient forefathers
Who made us all what we are,
Would you let him?
Profanity is let loose, alas,
And the peace of our dead
Is at stake.
I interpret only wrath,
Alas!
[*The child cries.*]

SECOND ELDER See,
Darkness and thunder, again!
See!
The mob rise
With fire between their teeth.
See.
They mean sacrifice!

SHANKA Should we have mocked,
Wise Elders,
The cry of innocence?

FIRST ELDER I say
He has turned stubborn,
Possessed of the evil ghosts
Of the strange ones.
. . . Out of a fetid chiefdom
Is born a sick people,

Out of a foul wisdom
A traitor! . . .
See how he pretends,
Yet even shame
Cannot break him!

SECOND ELDER The tribe is breathless
I say!
They approach!
Their spears
Gleaming above their heads . . .
Leaping to a live flame . . .
Shaking as if mocking the heavens . . .
They approach!
They mean sacrifice
I say!

THIRD ELDER Let them have Shanka
With this child of shame,
Before they have us
I say!
[*The child cries a long-drawn-out cry.*]

FIRST ELDER Let the people have them.
Let the mob get them.
Let the tribe tear them.

ODA-MAN And our dead shall be
Justly avenged!
Our age-old oracle
Justly fulfilled.
Go, Shanka,
Meet the screaming peoples
Of the Oda Oak Valley.
Go, lost son of our tribe,
Go, with this child of shame.
Go,

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I command you in the name
Of our ancestral spirits.
[*The child cries.*]

SHANKA We cry
Only to join your hands,
Bitter fate,
Come.
Abortive cry against darkness,
Come.
The truer the love
The thornier the fate
And the more reason to die.
Come, darkness, come.
[*The child cries a long-drawn-out cry.*]

SHANKA Sing on,
Child of innocence, sing.
Sing,
The life-giving mother silenced,
Sing. Sing on,
Daughter of peace, sing.
Sing, the father
For a forbidden truth condemned,
Sing. Sing on, and forward,
Child of sacrifice, sing.
Sing,
Abortive cry against darkness,
Sing. Sing.
[*Repeatedly, the child cries a long-drawn-out cry as they approach the mob.*]

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